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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE WORLD SOCIAL SITUATION AND TO YOUTH, AGEING, DISABLED PERSONS AND THE FAMILY

Implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. At its forty-eighth session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 48/95 in which it requested the Secretary-General to report biennially to the Assembly on the progress of efforts to ensure the equalization of opportunities and full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the various bodies of the United Nations system. The present report was prepared pursuant to this request.

2. The question of equalization of opportunities and full inclusion of people with disabilities within the various bodies of the United Nations system was first raised during the preparations for the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) in 1981, in the context of access to buildings and facilities. The Advisory Committee for the Year, at its second session in 1980, recommended that the United Nations and its specialized agencies adopt a policy to make all facilities accessible to disabled persons (see A/35/444, annex). Acting upon this recommendation, the General Assembly, in its resolution 35/133, requested the Secretary-General to examine the question of access to United Nations buildings, documents and information for persons with sensorial disabilities.

3. In its resolution 37/53, the Assembly urged all organs, organizations and agencies of the United Nations system to undertake new measures or expedite those already under way to improve access to their buildings, facilities and information sources. In 1984, the Secretary-General submitted a comprehensive report on the subject to the Assembly at its thirty-ninth session (A/39/191 and Corr.1).

4. In its resolution 43/98, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to examine possible ways in which United Nations meetings, information materials and documents could be made more accessible to disabled persons. In its resolution 44/70, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to encourage all organs and bodies of the United Nations to take into account in their programmes and operational activities the specific needs of disabled persons.

II. SUMMARY OF MEASURES IMPLEMENTED

5. The following measures have been taken with a view to implementing the recommendations contained in the above resolutions:

(a) A general survey of the question of access to United Nations buildings, documents and information for persons with disabilities was undertaken. In 1982, three studies were commissioned and prepared by three consultants with disabilities. The studies dealt with visual, hearing and physical impairments respectively and their implications for the participation of persons with such impairments in the activities of the United Nations;

(b) A handbook entitled "Designing with care" containing standard specifications for a barrier-free environment was issued;

(c) An accessibility guide to United Nations Headquarters for persons with disabilities was issued in 1982 by the Department of Public Information;

(d) Studies undertaken by the Secretariat Building Management Services led to modifications in the physical environment of the United Nations Headquarters with a view to achieving barrier-free access;

(e) In 1983, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) adopted recommendations for the implementation of its policy statement on employment of the disabled in the organizations of the Untied Nations system (ACC/1983/9, annex VI);

(f) In 1989, ACC promulgated a plan to improve employment opportunities for disabled persons within the Secretariat, in keeping with the recommendations contained in the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons;

(g) In 1990, the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV), in her capacity as focal point for disability issues in the system, requested the executive secretaries of the regional commissions and the heads of the specialized agencies to report on the problem of accessibility and accommodation of the needs of disabled persons. The Director-General suggested that agencies consider including in their programme budgets for meetings, conferences and other activities appropriate means to enable the participation of sensory-impaired persons by making available sign language interpretation and materials in Braille or audio-cassette tapes. Agencies were also requested to consider measures to enable disabled participants to gain better access to meeting premises, including through the provision of personal attendants. In response to the request, information was provided on the measures taken by agencies described in the following paragraphs.

6. At the United Nations Office at Vienna the Resource Group on Accessibility was established in 1989 to review the facilities in the Vienna International Centre in order to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities. The Group noted that some important modifications could be made at minimum cost. It also suggested that modifications which would have substantive financial implications should be included in the respective budgets of UNOV, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which share the Centre's premises. In that regard, the Group was informed of the status of the Major Repairs Fund administered jointly by the Austrian Government and Building Management Service (BMS). The Group conducted two "walk-arounds" of the building. Its findings were brought to the attention of the BMS Advisory Committee. Priority was given to items which were low-cost yet had a profound effect on making the facilities more accessible.

7. At the United Nations Office at Geneva major improvements were made at the Petit-Saconnex annex and at the William Rappard Centre (which housed the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), a facility belonging to FIPOI (Fondation des immeubles pour les organisations internationales) which is responsible for alterations and modifications.

8. At the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme, special ramps and signboards have been installed.

9. The entire premises at UNICEF headquarters in New York are fully accessible and barrier-free for persons with disabilities. The issue of accessibility was also brought to the attention of UNICEF regional and country directors.

10. The premises of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) are entirely accessible to wheelchair users. The facilities of FAO (meeting rooms, catering services, toilets and telephones) are easily reached by wheelchair users. FAO has prepared a brochure in English, French, Spanish and Italian to provide guidance to the disabled persons who visit or work at FAO. Special earphones are provided to delegates with hearing difficulties.

11. At the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) which took place at Rome in June 1990, the representative of the World Health Organization raised the question of improved communication channels by the inclusion of Braille materials or audio cassettes and sign language as well as the provision of personal attendants.

12. Concrete measures have been taken to improve access of disabled persons to the conference premises and offices at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris. With respect to communication channels, the provision of printed materials in Braille or on audio-cassette tapes and sign language interpretation are made available at the request of organizers of meetings in liaison with Conference Division. The UNESCO Courrier is also issued in Braille.

13. The International Civil Aviation Organization Assembly requested its Council to complete a review of the problems of elderly and disabled air travellers and to determine appropriate measures to improve their access to

airports and air services. These issues were on the agenda of the tenth session of the Facilitation Division (April 1988).

III. UNITED NATIONS TASK FORCE ON ACCESSIBILITY

14. At the initiative of the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the Secretariat, a task force was established at United Nations Headquarters in January 1995 to review steps which might increase the Organization's responsiveness to the needs of delegates, staff members or visitors with disabilities. The task force on accessibility is chaired by a representative of the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management and is comprised of representatives of the Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, the Office of Human Resources Management including a representative of the Chief Medical Officer, the Office of Conference and Support Service including the Security and Safety Service, the Buildings Management Service of the Department for Administration and Management and the Department of Public Information.

15. The task force, which holds regular meetings, has concentrated on practical measures to improve access to the physical environment. The task force involved staff members with disabilities in the "walk-around" to identify deficiencies in the facilities for persons with disabilities and to exchange ideas for possible improvements. Modifications to the facilities that could be made at minimum cost as well as those likely to have considerable financial implications were identified.

16. In February 1995, the Task Force held a working session with Mr. Bengt Lindqvist, the Special Rapporteur on Disability of the Commission for Social Development. From the "walk-around" of the facilities at United Nations Headquarters and the meeting with the Special Rapporteur, the picture emerged that the facilities are, in general, accommodating to persons with disabilities. The following improvements were initiated in accordance with suggestions and the recommendations of the Task Force: installation of railings along the library walkway; opening of the southernmost gate at the 42nd Street entrance in view of the obstacle of the man-hole in front of the northern door; installing an automated teller machine on the 1st floor of the Secretariat building to allow easier access to it than to the one on the 4th floor; installing wheelchair access to the staff cafe on the 4th floor of the Secretariat building.

17. In addition to physical accessibility to conferences and meetings, there is the issue of accessibility to documents and information for persons with disabilities so that they may be able to follow and participate in the work of conferences and meetings, their preparation and follow-up, whether as members of the staff or as delegates, experts and observers. In this connection, measures to meet the needs of those with visual, hearing or speech impairments have most often been raised, in particular availability of documents in "large type", Braille or tape/cassette form, as well as of special audio facilities and interpretation in sign language.

18. The technology now available and widely in use at United Nations Headquarters as well as at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna and at other locations has markedly improved accessibility in the broader sense as compared to the situation of only a few years ago. The generalized use of electronic means for generating, storing and accessing documents has made it possible to provide, inexpensively and quickly, information and documents in large print, in Braille, on audio-cassettes, on computer diskettes and through direct on-line access.

19. Sign language interpretation can be made available on request at Headquarters for specific authorized meetings. However, consultations concerning the provision of sign language interpretation as a regular service at meetings of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies or of expert meetings convened under the auspices of the United Nations, have not yet led to a sufficient degree of agreement on the policy and technical issues to be resolved.

IV. PLANNED ACTIVITIES

20. The Task Force on Accessibility will continue its work and develop a phased approach and implementation plan covering the years 1996-2000, with the objective of ensuring full accessibility to the United Nations facilities. As a benchmark at Headquarters, the Task Force adopted the goal of compliance with the standards of the host country as set out in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In this regard, contacts have been established with the United States National Council on Disability and the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. Through these offices, the Secretariat has been provided with available reference standards, particularly the ADA Accessibility Guidelines and the New York Building Code, as well as relevant materials for conference planners. The Mayor's Office has also contacted the New York City Sanitation Commission concerning snow removal around the United Nations complex and problems of access encountered by United Nations staff members and visitors with disabilities.

21. The Secretariat is contacting the competent officials in the specialized agencies and other organizations and bodies of the United Nations system to inform them of the experience gained by the Headquarters Task Force and to request information on recent measures taken and problems encountered in making buildings, conferences, information and documents fully accessible. The information made available by the respective entities of the United Nations system will be included in the next biennial report of the Secretary-General on this subject, due to be presented to the Assembly at its fifty-second session. The question of access is also on the agenda of the annual Inter-Agency Consultation on Disability, which is scheduled to convene in October 1995 and is to consider, inter alia, the desirability and feasibility of common or harmonized approaches in the system.